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SOME OF THE METHODS EMPLOYED IN THE CARE AND TRAINING OF FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN OF THE LOWER GRADES.

By WALTER E. FERNALD, M. D.

During the past six years at the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded we have admitted a large number, several hundred in all, of relatively young children of the lower grade, custodial cases so-called. These children are often feeble physically, perhaps incapable of walking without assistance, of feeding or dressing themselves, or of making their bodily wants known. Some of them are utterly stupid and listless. Others are very restless and excitable, with marked mischievous and destructive tendencies, such as removing and destroying clothing, breaking window glass, table crockery, and furniture. Many cases have very untidy and disgusting personal habits.

When our custodial building was ready for occupancy we received practically at one time a group of about one hundred cases selected from the most urgent of the many applications on file. The characteristics of this particular group of children may be understood from the following extract from the annual report for 1890:—

“When admitted nearly every one of these children was noisy, untidy, stubborn, and intractable generally. Few of them had been under any sort of control or discipline. One had not been out of doors for over three years. Several had been confined in barred rooms at home. How to care for them was a discouraging problem. The wards were veritable bedlams. The children shrieked and made dreadful noises, tore off and destroyed their clothing and seemed utterly unmanageable. Their attendants were appalled and discouraged at the apparent hopelessness of trying to bring any degree of order out of such chaos and were almost ready to resign in a body,” etc.

The question of providing suitable and proper care and

training for these children has presented so many problems and difficulties and caused so much anxiety that I feel warranted in presenting a brief consideration of some of the practical methods of management of these low grade cases, not with the idea of offering anything especially new or valuable but with the hope of bringing out the experience and views of other members of this association.

As a rule these children come to us in poor physical condition. They are generally pale, flabby and badly nourished. They need generous feeding with the most nutritious food in good variety but of the plainest sort, such as good bread and butter, cereals, an abundance of pure milk, meat at least once a day preferably in the form of soluble soups and broths, and a liberal supply of fresh vegetables. As a rule I believe it is perfectly safe and proper to allow these children to eat all they wish of the plain and wholesome articles of diet enumerated above. Their digestive and assimilative functions are so imperfectly performed that they often actually need a much larger ration than would a normal person. They should be given ample time for eating slowly and carefully. The food should be thoroughly cooked and carefully cut and prepared. Half-cooked food or too solid food, bolted without mastication is a frequent cause of diarrhœa and other digestive disturbances.

They should be given an abundance of cold water to drink. The desire of attendants to limit the number of wet beds may be carried so far as to be really injurious to the child's health. Their emunctories become clogged and choked if the ingestion of nature's universal solvent be unduly restricted. The urine especially becomes overloaded with excrementitious products and this is a frequent and potent cause of an irritable bladder and the resulting incontinence. At breakfast and dinner they should have all the cold water they want. At supper time the amount may be more carefully regulated.

There is a firmly established tradition that feeble-minded children emit a characteristic disagreeable odor and that while the offence of this odor may be mitigated and lessened it cannot be entirely removed. There is nothing mysterious about this odor—it generally means that the child is not clean. It can often be greatly lessened by the extraction of decayed teeth and the cleansing and healing of suppurating

buccal or oral surfaces. The improved digestion following careful regulation of the diet often removes the cause of a bad breath. Close attention to the personal habits of the child is always necessary. The clogged excretory organs should be flushed out by an ample supply of pure water internally as above suggested. But after all the one important indication is the external application of soap and warm water. These children need very frequent bathing, perhaps daily or even oftener. The bath should be very thorough; there should be an abundance of warm water, the entire body should be soaped and vigorously scrubbed with a large soft flesh brush, with especial attention to the feet and the flexures of the joints, afterwards thoroughly rinsing the entire body with clean water. Unless this process is carefully and continually supervised even a first-class attendant will be very likely to do it in an imperfect manner. Merely wetting the body with a little water simply aggravates the condition which causes the bad odor. This frequent and thorough bathing has a very beneficial effect upon the nutrition and general health of these children.

These cases need frequent changes of body clothing, many of them daily or even several times a day. One wet or soiled garment will pollute the air of an entire ward.

One of the most troublesome features in the care of these low grade cases is the frequency of untidy personal habits. They keep up the infantile habit of voiding urine and faeces whenever the desire is felt. The bladder and rectum have not been trained to periodical retention and discharge under the control of the volition. This may be due to dullness of sensation, lack of will power, general atony of the muscular apparatus especially of the sphincters and hollow muscles, or to other causes. In many cases the indolence of the child is a potent factor. We must cause the child to lose the habit of being untidy and to acquire the habit of being cleanly and decent. The general raising of the physiological standard, both mentally and physically, which results from the regulation of the diet, the careful bathing, the outdoor exercise, and the physical and other training, often correct the untidy habits without special treatment. In the way of special training the first thing is to accustom the child to being habitually dry and clean. Whenever he wets or soils his clothing or bedding he should at once be bathed and dressed

with clean, dry garments. He soon learns that this adds greatly to his comfort.

Ample and convenient toilet arrangements are very necessary. In addition to a liberal number of water closets we have found great advantage in the use of broad, shallow, agate vessels, set on a shelf close under the seat of a small hole chair. These vessels can be easily inspected and provide the necessary accommodations for speedily excusing a large number of children. On one ward with forty children we have sixteen closets and chairs. These untidy children are regularly detailed in squads for duty in the toilet room the first thing after rising in the morning, the last thing before going to bed at night and at regular and stated intervals during the day. The night attendant has a list of the cases who are to be taken up once, twice or oftener during the night. They are kept in the toilet room from twenty to thirty minutes or more each time and they soon learn that they are expected to accomplish the desired result before they are allowed to return to the ward. We have found that constant access to the closet does not accomplish the same results as the periodical "excusing," as it is called. This method, patiently and thoroughly carried out in conjunction with the other training, generally produces very satisfactory results. A large proportion of these cases become permanently cleanly provided a reasonable amount of oversight is maintained.

These children should spend much of their time in the open air. During the summer months they should practically live out of doors. Ample recreation grounds should be provided, situated near the building where they live so that even the feeble and helpless ones can use them. This playground should be warm and sunny, with protection from chilling winds and with shade available during the heat of the summer. It should also be so situated that the children are not exposed to the gaze of idle curiosity seekers. A basket of playthings should always accompany the children to the playground. Swings, hammocks, sand gardens, shovels, hoes, toy carts, wheelbarrows, &c., should be provided to interest and occupy them. The attendants should actually direct the play of the children. A child who is playing horse or digging in the sand will not be destroying his clothing and for the time being he will probably forget other un-

desirable habits. An idle child will be a troublesome child. It is rather difficult to provide occupation and exercise simple enough for them to understand and to do, or to devise means of diverting their untoward energies into channels which are in the direction of order and normal conduct. For this purpose we have laid out several circular walks or tracks similar to the usual athletic running track each perhaps five hundred feet in circumference. On these tracks these low grade cases are encouraged to work off their surplus energy by walking around and around the course as long as may be necessary. This expedient makes it possible to prescribe the definite amount of actual exercise necessary in each case. The ordinary walking about the grounds will hardly do this as with innate indolence they are constantly looking for a resting place and at the first corner they expect to turn back to the house. On the circular track, which for all practical purposes is endless, they despair of finding a turning place and soon become resigned to the salutary exercise.

In the same line are the "stone piles" which consist of circles about ten feet in diameter formed by placing large stones side by side. Two of these encircled areas are located about fifty feet apart and in one of them are placed a large number of small cobble stones. The exercise consists in carrying these stones, one at a time, from one circle to the other until all are transferred. Children learn to do this who are mentally incapable of understanding or performing the most simple formal gymnastic exercise. It is work reduced to its lowest terms. They really enjoy this exercise and will keep at it for a long time. The materials employed are indestructible and this is a very great advantage. These walking tracks and stone piles are located on the playgrounds of these low grade children. While performing these simple exercises the child ceases his destructive actions or vicious habits and perhaps for the first time realizes the luxury of normal muscular fatigue.

Dry smooth sidewalks should be provided in order that they may be taken out of doors daily even during the winter season. Their feeble vitality and sluggish circulation make it necessary that they should be very warmly clad in cold weather. On actually storming days they can put on their hats and coats, and with all the windows wide open they practically get the benefit of the outdoor air by marching

around and around the ward. They should be kept constantly moving so that at night they are pleasantly fatigued and ready for sleep. This active, natural outdoor exercise is infinitely better than any gymnasium drill.

When they cannot play out of doors some occupation must be constantly provided. A large supply of simple, attractive, durable toys such as brightly colored building blocks, dolls, or the modern indestructible iron toys, &c., should be in every living room. They should be allowed and encouraged to get down on the floor with their playthings. There is no more unhappy sight than to see rows of wretched children sitting idly about a ward with no opportunity to harmlessly work off their surplus energy. It is no wonder that they are destructive and troublesome under such conditions.

The axiom of the new education that "play is a child's work" applies to low grade feeble-minded children as well as to normal childhood. In normal infancy and childhood, however, the extraordinary activity of the special senses and an innate spontaneity of action enable the child to rapidly acquire a wide experience. His acute powers of attention, observation and perception, impelling him to closest scrutiny and investigation of each new thing, and his countless experiments in physics, all of which we call play, are the means adopted by nature to exercise and develop the faculties. But with these low grade cases the feeble power of attention, the weak will power and defective judgment, delay and lessen if not actually prevent this development. This control of the body and its functions, and familiarity with the simple properties of matter and force, which a normal child seems to acquire almost intuitively, can be gained by these children only after a long continued process of training. The beginnings of this training must be made very simple and natural and the successive steps very gradual and progressive, going from that which the child already knows or can do, to something a little more difficult.

While special gymnastic exercises are of great value as a means of mental and physical discipline and development they are of secondary importance compared to the exercises incident to the games and amusements common to all children. The well known fact that these lower grade cases, as well as feeble-minded children of the higher grades, are pleasantly aroused and stimulated by music, and the further fact

that they are quite prone to imitate even habits or actions which they do not at all understand, can be directly applied in the practical training exercises. A noisy, unruly class of very low grade children can be induced to march in line and more or less in step for a long time to the beat of a drum, showing real interest and pleasure. Children will do this who have previously shown little idea of order or precision either of mind or body. This orderly marching can be gradually made more complicated, single file, double file, slower, faster, etc., walking on tiptoe, running, jumping over hurdles, etc., all to strongly accented music and all in imitation of the teacher or a skillful leader. I have great faith in the drum as a mental stimulant for the active exercises for these children, preferring it to the piano for this purpose.

The practical physical exercises for these cases must be made much more simple than those given in any published system of gymnastics with which I am familiar. I have found it very helpful to carefully write out the various schedules of movements which call for the natural use of the various parts of the body, the doing of common things, etc. The teacher will seldom do good work if she depends upon general principles and the inspiration of the moment for the details of this trying work. The idea of having a *show* class will greatly lessen the value of this kind of a drill. If the teacher is not interested herself she cannot hope to interest or hold the wandering attention of her pupils. The teacher stands before the class and herself performs the movement calling upon the children to imitate her, giving the command in a clear, ringing tone of voice. The entire exercise must be short sharp and decisive. A child is allowed to observe others perform the movements many times before he is expected to do them.

"At first we elicit volition with reference to a very simple muscular movement. By degrees we can bring the child's will to bear upon combined movements requiring the co-ordinated use of a more complicated muscular apparatus."

In these early lessons the child's consciousness becomes more active and he learns, perhaps for the first time, *to will to do* certain definite things. His wandering powers of attention, observation, and perception are assisted and strengthened by the combined influence of the music, the spoken command, and the action performed before him. He learns

to see what he looks at, to hear, to understand, and to obey.

After the connection between the spoken command and the desired movement is thoroughly understood the teacher omits the action, and the class perform it from dictation alone, without the music. This is a much more complicated process than the imitative drill. The child must be closely attentive, he must hear and understand the command, he must will to do, he must send out the correct nervous impulse to move certain groups of muscles in a definite manner.

As a direct result of this training the child often becomes relatively quiet, orderly and obedient. These exercises develop a power of will and of self-control that it would be hard to arouse in any other way.

Right here I want to emphasize my firm conviction that it is utter nonsense to attempt this training of low grade cases unless it is done in the most painstaking, conscientious and thorough manner by a teacher who thoroughly believes in the real value of this work.

When we began this marching and drill to music with one group of recently admitted cases with habitually untidy habits the attendants at once noted the fact that these children never wet their clothing during the active exercise.

At intervals following each active exercise comes the drill in silence and quietness when each child is expected to sit perfectly still with arms folded for perhaps five minutes at a time. This is a valuable lesson in mental and physical self-control.

These children need long continued actual instruction in dressing and undressing, buttoning garments, lacing shoes, etc. They are taught to correctly use familiar utensils and to do simple domestic work. Here also we have found great assistance in having the schedules of the exact exercises to be attempted carefully written out with the assignment of the different children to the various classes. We have regular classes, each containing about six pupils, in floor polishing, faucet burnishing, scouring knives, dusting, sweeping, bedmaking, &c. Children learn to do these things well who show no interest whatever in the idealizations of the kindergarten. Indeed books, slates, and the conventional curriculum of the school room are not for these low grade children. Yet all of this training is education in the truest sense.